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The Difficult Art of Counterinsurgency Eludes the Russians

By CHARLES MOHR

THE Soviet armed forces, which have been fighting longer in Afghanistan than they did in World War II, have apparently learned relatively few military lessons there, Western experts say. Indeed, perhaps the Russians' most important decision in Afghanistan has been to resist the temptation to escalate the hostilities. With an estimated total of 110,000 men, "the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan," as it is called in Moscow, has lived up to its name, having grown only insignificantly since it entered Afghanistan in December 1979.

Moscow's limited-war policy may be strained by the Reagan Administration's recent decision to provide shoulder-held portable antiaircraft missiles known as Stingers to rebels fighting in Afghanistan and Angola. The decision also worries some Western experts because some of the Afghan rebels are based in Iran. Critics fear that the Stingers, which could be used against civilian airliners, might fall into the hands of international terrorists. President Reagan, asked at his news conference last week if he had such concerns about Stingers reportedly destined for rebels in Angola, declined to discuss who is getting the missiles.

The Russians have not followed the United States example in Vietnam, where the commitment of 19,000 advisers grew to more than 600,000 combat troops in about three years without decisive results. The Russians have not achieved decisive results, either, but they have held down their political, economic and military costs by limiting the size of their quagmire. "They do not need a quick victory," said one American military officer.

However, despite Moscow's reputation as the global incubator of guerrilla warriors and teacher of insurgency techniques, its achievements in the difficult art of counterinsurgency have not been impressive. "The Afghanistan experience suggests that armies will do well only at those things for which they habitually prepare and practice," concludes Maj. Joseph J. Collins, of the United States Army. Since its last big war ended in 1945, the Soviet army has prepared almost exclusively for large-

scale, mechanized warfare against conventional enemies. Soviet military journals have published relatively few articles on Afghanistan-related subjects such as mountain warfare, helicopter operations and physical conditioning of troops. Analysts think the Soviet high command prefers to concentrate on conventional operations and regards the guerrilla conflict as an aberration with little future applicability.

Much of what Moscow has learned in Afghanistan has been mundane and of limited value. For example, to safeguard roads from ambushes and mines, the Russians have sometimes dropped flares to protect trucks at night and have spread smoke screens for convoys, an innovation of sorts. Road clearing is a problem in all guerrilla

wars. Large numbers of soldiers are required, but the results are often poor and seldom lasting. Partly to leapfrog the nagging road problem, the Russians have embraced the helicopter much as the Americans did in Vietnam. But they are using only an estimated 650 helicopters, including about 250 armed gunships, far fewer than the thousands the United States had in Vietnam.

Tactically and strategically, the Russians seem to be as baffled as the Americans were in Southeast Asia. According to some reports, the Russians are increasingly moving troops by helicopter. They have apparently learned — as the Americans did — that in guerrilla wars small units are more useful but at greater risk than large ones. And in the central Panjshir Valley, where the Russians used to bombard an area with artillery and air strikes for a week before attacking, they have learned to move more quickly.

Overall, however, the evidence is overwhelming that the Russians have tried to quell the insurgency with heavy firepower, much as other armies have done with only limited success. They have succeeded in depopulating sizable zones, which may have helped them, Western experts think, but have not come close to ending the war.

"Soviet strategy appears to have been to hold the major centers of communications, limit infiltration and destroy local strongholds at minimum cost to their own forces," Major Collins wrote in *Parameters*, the Army War College journal. "In effect, Soviet policy has been a combination of scorched earth and migratory genocide." But even the limited use of toxins and poison gas apparently has not stopped the insurgents.

One Washington expert thinks the Russians' best hope, although a wan one, is to strengthen Afghanistan's army. They have had some success, according to Western intelligence, despite earlier mass desertions and mutinies. But few experts think the war will be "Afghanized" soon. Jane's Defense Weekly once said the war was giving "vital experience to the Soviet officer corps," but not everyone agrees. No interesting new Soviet military doctrines have emerged, and their rigid, formal system does not encourage innovation or flexibility. One Afghan army colonel who defected told Western interrogators that the Soviet forces were oversupervised, lacking in initiative and "addicted to cookbook warfare."